

AXLE ASSEMBLY WITH COOLING PUMP

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0001] The present invention generally relates to drive line power transfer mechanisms and more particularly, to drive line power transfer mechanisms that include a cooling system.

[0002] Modern vehicles typically include an axle assembly having a housing and a differential assembly. The housing includes a cavity into which the differential assembly is rotatably disposed. The differential assembly is mechanically coupled to the vehicle's engine by a drive shaft. The differential assembly is also coupled to the vehicle drive wheels via a pair of axle shafts. The differential assembly regulates the drive torque between the axle shafts thereby causing the shafts to rotate. During operation of the vehicle, friction between the various components of the differential assembly generates heat, which if unabated could decrease the useful life of the axle assembly. A lubricating fluid, which is contained within the cavity of the axle assembly is therefore typically employed to remove heat from the various components of the differential assembly. The lubricating fluid then rejects, or transfers, this heat to the housing, which, in turn, rejects or transfers this heat via convection, conduction, and radiation to the environment in which the vehicle is operating.

[0003] Current advances in the fuel efficiency of vehicles have resulted in decreased air flow under the vehicle, which significantly reduces the capability of the housing of the axle assembly to reject heat.

[0004] One solution that has been suggested utilizes a dedicated heat exchanger for removing heat from the housing of the axle assembly. Several drawbacks have been noted with this approach, however. For example, the viscosity of the lubricating fluids in an axle assembly is such that the lubricating fluid is relatively difficult to pump, particularly when the ambient air temperature is relatively low. Another drawback concerns the cost of the pumps and heat exchangers used in these systems.

[0005] In view of the aforementioned drawbacks, there remains a need in the art for an axle assembly having a cooling system that provides improved cooling of the axle lubricant and axle assembly components.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0006] In one preferred form, the present invention provides a axle assembly having a housing, a power transfer mechanism and a fluid. The housing has a wall member that defines a cavity. The power transfer mechanism is positioned within the cavity. The fluid extracts heat from the power transfer mechanism during operation of the drive line power transfer assembly. The fluid transfers the heat to the wall member via an inside surface of the wall member and the wall member transfers this heat to the ambient air via the outside surface of the wall member. The axle assembly further includes an wheel located outside the housing which is operably coupled to the power transfer mechanism for rotation therewith. The wheel includes at least one duct that is adapted to

pump air to the outside surface of the differential thereby increasing the cooling capacity associated with the power transfer assembly.

[0007] In another form the present invention provides a generally solid body bounded by an annular leading surface, an annular trailing surface, and an outer surface, wherein the leading surface and the trailing surface are generally parallel, the body having a central bore and a plurality of radially spaced apertures extending therethrough from the leading surface to the trailing surface wherein the central bore is adapted to restrain the wheel for rotation with a shaft and the radially spaced apertures are adapted to draw a fluid therethrough during said rotation

[0008] Further areas of applicability of the present invention will become apparent from the detailed description provided hereinafter. It should be understood that the detailed description and specific examples, while indicating the preferred embodiment of the invention, are intended for purposes of illustration only and are not intended to limit the scope of the invention.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0009] Additional advantages and features of the present invention will become apparent from the subsequent description and the appended claims taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings wherein:

[0010] Figure 1 is a perspective view of an exemplary motor vehicle into which the axle assembly constructed in accordance with the teachings of the present invention is incorporated;

[0011] Figure 2 is a schematic view of the drive train of the motor vehicle of Figure 1;

[0012] Figure 3 is a plan view of the differential portion of an axle assembly of the drive train in Figure 2;

[0013] Figure 4 is a side view of the differential of Figure 3;

[0014] Figure 5 is a perspective view of the wheel shown in Figure 3;

[0015] Figure 6 is a side view of the wheel of Figure 5;

[0016] Figure 7 is a front view of the wheel of Figure 5;

[0017] Figure 8 is a plan view of a conventional duct within a streamline body;

[0018] Figure 9 is a sectional view taken along line 9-9 of Figure 8; and

[0019] Figure 10 is an alternate embodiment of the wheel of Figure 5.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0020] The following description of the preferred embodiment is merely exemplary in nature and is in no way intended to limit the invention, its application, or uses. In particular, the present invention is directed to an improved axle assembly of the type used in motor vehicle drive train applications. The axle assembly of the present invention includes a cooling pump to pump air to the outside of the differential assembly thereby lowering the operating temperature without a major modification to an existing axle assembly. To accomplish this end, an wheel is provided to rotate with the rotational members of the axle assembly and pump air to the outside of the differential. The axle

assembly of the present invention further enables improved manufacturing of the axle assembly due to the simplified task of attaching the wheel to the yoke and pinion shaft during manufacture. This method further enables a retrofit of existing vehicles. Thus, the axle assembly of the present invention may be utilized with a wide variety of applications and is not intended to be specifically limited to the particular application recited herein.

[0021] With particular reference now to Figure 1, an exemplary motor vehicle is shown and generally indicated by the reference numeral 10. Vehicle 10 is shown to include a body 12, an underbody 14, and a drive train 20. Referring now to Figure 2, drive train 20 is shown to include an engine 22, a transmission 24, having an output shaft 26 and a propeller shaft 28 connecting output shaft 26 to a pinion shaft 30 of the rear axle assembly 32. Rear axle assembly 32 includes an axle housing 34, a differential assembly 36 supported in axle housing 34, and a pair of axle shafts 38 and 40, respectively interconnected to the left and right rear wheels 42 and 44. Pinion shaft 30 has a pinion shaft gear 46 fixed thereto which drives a ring gear 48 that is fixed to a differential casing 50 of differential assembly 36. A gear set 52 supported within differential casing 50 transfers rotary power from differential casing 50 to output shafts 54 and 56 connected to axle shafts 38 and 40, respectively, and facilitates relative rotation therebetween. While differential assembly 36 is shown in a rear wheel drive application, the present invention is contemplated for use in differential assemblies installed in transaxles for use in front wheel drive vehicles and/or in transfer cases for use with four wheel drive vehicles.

[0022] Referring now to Figures 3 and 4, axle assembly 32 is described in detail. Differential assembly 36 is a parallel axle type that includes a axle housing 34 defining an internal chamber 58 with a lubricating fluid 60 contained therein. Pinion shaft 30 connects to propeller shaft 28 via a yoke 62 that is operably connected to pinion 30 for rotation therewith. An wheel 66 is interposed between differential assembly 36 and yoke 62 such that wheel 66 is coupled for rotation with yoke 62 and pinion shaft 30. In the particular example provided, wheel 66 is bolted to pinion shaft 30 and yoke 62, but those skilled in the art will appreciate that wheel 66 could be coupled to pinion shaft 30 and/or yoke 62 in any appropriate manner. Axle housing 34 includes an inside surface 70 and an outside surface 72. Lubricating fluid 60 is in contact with ring gear 48 and gearset 52 and receives heat therefrom. Lubricating fluid 60 is in contact with inside surface 70 of axle housing 34 for transfer of heat thereto.

[0023] During operation of vehicle 10 the internal moving components of axle assembly 32, including gearset 52, pinion shaft gear 46, and ring gear 48, produce heat. This heat is transferred to lubricating fluid 60 and then transferred to axle housing 34, via inside surface 70, and then out axle housing 34 through outside surface 72. The amount of heat removed from outside surface 72 depends upon the volumetric airflow across axle housing 38. As vehicle 10 is moving, airflow across outside surface 72 results in forced air convection, which can be supplemented with the air supplied by wheel 66, as discussed below. While axle housing 34 is shown to include a smooth outer outside surface 72, it would be appreciated that outside surface 72 could be provided with fins that

could add to the structural stiffness and/or heat dissipation capability of outside surface 72.

[0024] With reference now to Figures 5 – 7, wheel 66 is described in greater detail. Wheel 66 is shown to include a cylindrical outer surface 80, an annular leading surface 82, an annular trailing surface 84 and an inner cylindrical surface 86 defining a central bore 88. As best seen in Figure 7, wheel 66 further includes a partial cylindrical bore 90 that intersects leading surface 82 and forms a recessed cylindrical surface 92 and a recessed annular surface 94. Mounting apertures 96 are formed within wheel 66 from recessed surface 94 to trailing surface 84. Mounting apertures 96 are provided for attachment of wheel 66 to yoke 62 and/or pinion shaft 30.

[0025] Wheel 66 is further shown to include at least one duct 100 formed therein. Duct 100 is defined by a leading edge 102, a lip 104, a ramp 106, ramp walls 108, and an outlet 110. Outlet 110 defines an aperture within trailing surface 84. Leading edge 102, lip 104, and ramp walls 108 intersect leading surface 82 to define an opening 112. While outer surface 80 is illustrated as a cylindrical surface, it would be appreciated that outer surface 80 could be other shapes, such as frusto-conical or a plurality of intersecting polygons, depending upon the relative geometry of leading surface 82 and trailing surface 84.

[0026] Duct 100 is shown in Figures 5 – 7 to be a variable area duct such as detailed in National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA), Advance Confidential Report 5120 of November 13, 1945, declassified version

dated July 3, 1951, "An Experimental Investigation of NACA, Submerged-Duct Entrances." The geometry of duct 100 is formed to allow duct 100 to perform similar to a variable geometry NACA duct as discussed herein.

[0027] Referring now to Figures 8 and 9, a streamline body 120 is illustrated to include an outer surface 124 with a NACA duct 130 formed therein. NACA duct 130 is defined by a leading edge 132, a lip 134, a ramp 136, a pair of ramp walls 138 and a centerline C. The distance between leading edge 132 and lip 134 along centerline C is illustrated as length L. Lip 134 has a width W. Ramp walls 138 and ramp 136 are formed to converge as they approach lip 132. Thus formed, the cross-sectional area of duct 130 taken normal to centerline C increases from leading edge 132 to lip 134.

[0028] Laminar air flow in the direction of arrow F across streamline body 120 creates a boundary layer of air immediately adjacent streamline body 120. As the boundary layer encounters the leading edge 132 of NACA duct 130, the flow area available to the boundary layer increases. This increase in flow area provides a localized reduction in air pressure within the boundary layer. As the boundary layer continues to flow along the length L of the NACA duct 130 from the leading edge 132 to the lip 134, the curvature of the ramp walls 138 and the angle of the ramp 136 relative the outer surface 134 of the streamline body 120 create a further increase in flow area available to the boundary layer of air and a resulting further decrease in localized air pressure within the boundary layer. This decreased localized air pressure zone is defined by the air within the duct and immediately adjacent the duct opening. This decrease in air pressure

results in an increase in air velocity. The resulting low pressure acts to draw or suck air into the duct opening formed in the outer surface 124 by creating a vacuum effect. The air drawn into duct 130 is then directed to a preselected air intake, such as an engine intake or cooling surface.

[0029] The vacuum effect does not impart a significant amount of turbulence in the boundary layer. In contrast, an air scoop that is positioned into the path of the boundary layer will divert air into an opening in a surface of a streamline body by pushing the air into the surface opening. This pushing of air, however, creates a reactive force within the scoop and creates drag in the boundary layer as turbulence is imparted to the boundary layer downstream of the scoop along the streamline body. Thus provided, a conventional NACA duct 130 draws in a portion of air from a boundary layer as the boundary layer of air passes the opening of the NACA duct 130, thus diverting air with negligible turbulence. The present invention utilizes this vacuum creating effect to suck air into ducts 100, as described below. As illustrated, NACA duct 130 is symmetrical along centerline C, although it will be appreciated by one skilled in the art that a duct need not be symmetrical to operate in the manner described above.

[0030] As best seen in Figures 5 and 6, the direction of travel, as indicated by arrow T, of vehicle 10 provides a resultant airflow generally in the direction of arrow A. This airflow impacts leading surface 82 and builds a resulting air pressure gradient along leading surface 82 with a higher pressure found adjacent lead surface 82. Layers of air adjacent leading surface 82 are represented as L1, L2, and L3, wherein the air pressure within layer L1 is greater

that the air pressure within layer L2, and the air pressure within layer L2 is greater than the air pressure within layer L3. Travel of vehicle 10 in direction T also results in rotation of wheel 66 in the direction shown in Figure 5. As best seen in Figures 5 and 7, duct 100 is formed in wheel 66 such that leading edge 102 is followed by lip 104 as wheel 66 rotates in the direction of arrow R. As wheel 66 rotates, ducts 100 create locations of localized low pressure within openings 112, in the same manner as discussed above with reference to the operation of a NACA duct 130. These locations of localized low pressure pull air from layer L1 into openings 112. Rotation of wheel 66 allows ducts 100 to draw in air which is expelled through outlets 110 and onto outside surface 72 of axle housing 34. This decrease in pressure within ducts 100 results in an increase in velocity for a gas such as air. This increase in velocity of air provides for a larger volumetric air flow directed to exterior surface 72 of axle housing 34 thereby providing a greater amount of heat dissipation from axle assembly 32. Further travel of vehicle 10 causes further rotation of wheel 66 and additional air to encounter leading surface 82. This further rotation of wheel 66 draws the additional air into ducts 100. Thus provided, wheel 66 provides a device useful to draw air and increase the velocity of the air to provide a greater cooling capacity to an existing assembly.

[0031] Referring now to Figure 10, an alternate embodiment of wheel 66 is shown as an wheel 266 including a plurality of ducts 200, a cylindrical outer surface 280, an annular leading surface 282, and an annular trailing surface 284. Each duct 200 is defined by a leading edge 202, a lip 204, a ramp 206, ramp

walls 208, and an outlet 210 that intersects trailing surface 284. Leading edge 202, lip 204, and ramp walls 208 intersect leading surface 282 to define an opening 212. Opening 212 has a generally oval cross section and ramp 206 is curved and integral with ramp walls 208. Wheel 266 operates in a manner similar to wheel 66 as discussed herein.

[0032] While ducts 100, 130 and 200 are illustrated with specific geometries, it would be appreciated by one skilled in the art that a duct of any other geometry within an wheel that is designed to draw air into the duct from an adjacent air layer could be utilized to produce a similar result.

[0033] The description of the invention is merely exemplary in nature and, thus, variations that do not depart from the gist of the invention are intended to be within the scope of the invention. Such variations are not to be regarded as a departure from the spirit and scope of the invention.

[0034] The curvature of ramp walls 138 relative the centerline C of NACA duct 130 is represented in Table 1 wherein the relationship between a distance x along centerline C from lip 134 and a corresponding distance y is tabulated. Distance y is the distance from the centerline C at distance x to the ramp walls 138.

x/L	y/B
0.0	0.500
0.05	0.4930
0.10	0.4670
0.20	0.3870
0.30	0.3100
0.40	0.2420
0.50	0.1950
0.60	0.1550
0.70	0.1200
0.80	0.0750
0.90	0.0575
1.00	0.0440

TABLE 1